



University of Connecticut
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Feeling Queasy? Take Some Deep Breaths

Deep breathing relieves nausea, according to UConn Health Center Study

FARMINGTON, Conn. – Controlled deep breathing alone is a good cure for nausea in many patients recovering from surgery, according to a study conducted by UConn Health Center.

“While studying the effect of aromatherapy on nausea, we were surprised to discover it was deep breathing alone that provided the relief,” said Lynn Anderson, R.N., B.S.N., who conducted the study with anesthesiologist Jeffrey Gross, M.D.

“Deeply breathing the vapors of alcohol, peppermint and a placebo saline solution all worked equally well to relieve nausea in patients recovering from surgery,” said Anderson, who is assistant nurse manager of the post anesthetic care unit at the Health Center.

Patients’ nausea scores were cut in half at five minutes after breathing therapy, whether the patients breathed in alcohol, peppermint or a placebo saline solution, Anderson said. The use of anti-vomiting drugs was cut in half in the study patients and satisfaction scores were high.

“Overall satisfaction was 87 percent. That’s really high when you consider our subjects were not feeling well. They had to be post operative and feeling sick to be in the study,” said Anderson.

Nausea after surgery complicates things for both patients and health care providers. Besides the discomfort suffered by patients, nausea can delay recovery and complicate an otherwise simple

procedure. While anti-nausea medications are effective, they can make patients drowsy and in some cases interfere with other medications.

“We started our study to see whether the aroma of peppermint or alcohol worked better to relieve nausea,” said Anderson. She and Gross studied 33 ambulatory surgery patients who reported nausea in the post anesthetic care unit. The patients were divided into three groups. One group received aromatherapy using isopropyl alcohol. Another group received the therapy using oil of peppermint and the third group inhaled a placebo saline solution. With scented gauze pads held directly beneath their nostrils, patients were instructed to slowly inhale through the nose and to slowly exhale through the mouth three times. The patients were assessed for nausea at two and five minutes. The deep breathing halved nausea scores at five minutes after treatment, regardless of aroma, including the placebo. Nearly half the patients (45 percent) still required medication for nausea during their stay in the unit, but typically 100 percent of the patients would have received drugs. “We think that’s a big improvement,” she said.

“Physiologically, we think the deep breathing worked to reduce nausea because of the closeness of the vomiting and respiratory centers in the brain. When the respiratory center in the brain is focused on taking controlled deep breaths, the vomiting center is less able to process thinking about nausea,” said Anderson.

“Since we calculated the results of our study, we’ve incorporated the breathing therapy into our practice. And, it’s spread to other parts of the hospital, including obstetrics and gynecology and in-patient surgery. When our patients complain of nausea, we have them breathe in alcohol before offering medications,” said Anderson. “We call it aromatherapy and we use alcohol even though we know it’s the breathing and not the aroma that provides the relief. It’s cheap, quick and there are no side effects. It’s even better than we thought.”

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The University of Connecticut Health Center includes the schools of medicine and dental medicine, John Dempsey Hospital, the UConn Medical Group, UConn Health Partners and University Dentists. Founded in 1961, the Health Center pursues a mission of providing outstanding health care education in an environment of exemplary patient care, research and public service. **Note:** News professionals are invited to visit the Office of Communications homepage at <http://www.uhc.edu/ocomm/> for archived news releases and other information.